



851

Montana wolf population, based on latest estimates

(Source: FWP with a 95% confidence interval at 673–1,062)

## Snow sled season begins

Montana offers over 4,000 miles of groomed snowmobile trails on public land maintained by local clubs and chambers of commerce. The support comes from grants provided by FWP's State Parks Division, as well as the snowmobile gas tax, the Resident Trail Pass, and decal fees.

For trail maps, visit the Montana Snowmobile Association website ([snowmobilemt.org](http://snowmobilemt.org)).

In addition, millions of acres of federal land are open for unrestricted winter travel. (Check for motorized vehicle restrictions in specific areas.)

To legally use a snowmobile on public land, you must register your sled and display the registration decal. Adults must have a motor vehicle driver's license. Minors must have a Snowmobile Safety Education Course certificate (from Montana or another state) and be accompanied by an adult who is within eyesight.

Snowmobiles traveling through winter wildlife habitat can disturb or displace the animals. To reduce possible harm to the habitat and wildlife:

- ▶ stay well clear of areas closed for wildlife protection;
- ▶ don't linger around wildlife; and
- ▶ never chase or harass wildlife.



## HUNTING

### How jerks ruin hunter access

Jerks exist in any outdoor activity. But in hunting, they can actually reduce opportunities for others. That's because hunters who disrespect landowners and private property can cause ranchers, farmers, and others to close their gates to the public for hunting and other recreation.

"A minority of hunters do these things, but it still creates problems for everyone else," says Jason Kool, FWP's Access Bureau chief.

Kool says FWP has begun a new public information campaign this hunting season to remind hunters about ethical behavior when on private land. "Hunters need to show private property and landowners respect and understand that hunting private land is a privilege," he says. "The first thing: Always ask permission. Then be sure to keep your vehicle on designated roads or trails, don't leave the remains of field-dressed animals in public view, and leave gates as you found them—open or closed."

According to Kool, landowners increasingly point to hunter misbehavior as a reason for cutting off public access. "Someone tears up a muddy trail or road, or they leave a gate open and cattle get mixed up or out. It quickly wrecks it for everyone else. There is no quicker way to close a property than



through poor hunter behavior," he says.

Kool adds that FWP field crews also report plenty of shot-up Block Management signs and sign-in boxes. "When landowners see signs riddled with bullet holes or sign-in boxes destroyed, it's not hard to imagine what they must think about those hunters," he says.

To promote ethical hunting, FWP is providing free "Ask for Access" bumper stickers at the agency headquarters and regional offices. The department has posted billboards and run newspaper ads statewide. Hunters are encouraged to use the hashtag #Ask4Access to report hunting jerks in action. ■

## FISHING

### Browns are getting more aggressive by the week

Look closely at photos of anglers holding trophy brown trout on many Montana rivers and you'll notice something similar in the background: trees with yellow leaves, or no leaves at all.

That's because most big browns are caught in October and November, when fish are moving upstream to spawn and will aggressively chase large streamers. The same finicky browns that ignored your dry flies and nymphs all summer start hammering big patterns like the Bunny Leech and Conehead Woolly Bugger.

According to Brian McGeehan, owner-outfitter of Montana Angler Fly Fishing in Bozeman, peak fishing on the run above Hebgen Reservoir in Yellowstone National Park is usually the third week of October. Monster browns on the Missouri River below Hauser and Holter Dams usually don't start chasing streamers until November. "If you want to move fish over 24 inches, make sure you are stripping the biggest streamers you can find," he says. "I usually have to tie my own tandem-hook streamers around 10 inches long. These massive flies are best fished on a 7- or 8-weight."

The Missouri and Madison are the most famous for late fall brown trout fishing, but any river that holds browns will fish well once the weather turns cold, up until about Thanksgiving. ■

In fall, the bigger the pattern, the bigger the brown.



## WINTER RECREATION

### Skate on "wild" ice

Ice skating on an indoor or park rink is fun, but skating on a glass-smooth frozen lake, pond, or reservoir can be otherworldly. When conditions are right—an even surface with no snow—it feels like flying. Sometimes "wild" ice is clear enough to see water, and even fish, below.

One of Montana's top spots for wild ice is Canyon Ferry Reservoir north of Townsend. Steady winds create vast snow-free areas sometimes a mile long. Other wild-ice skating opportunities include Freezout Lake, Hauser and Tiber Reservoirs, Whitefish Lake, and the bays of Flathead Lake and Fort Peck Reservoir.

Be safe. Skate only on ice four inches or thicker. (A good sign that ice is safe enough

Skating on natural ice can feel like flying.



for skating is the presence of vehicles.) Stay clear of open water or spots where springs enter and create weak ice. Skate with others. Carry ice-rescue picks—"claws"—and know

how to use them.

To learn where ice is thick enough and free enough of snow for natural outdoor skating, visit [facebook.com/WildIceMontana/](https://facebook.com/WildIceMontana/). ■